DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 498 CE 010 838

AUTHOR Feldman, Marvin
TITLE Toward a National Policy for Vocational Education.
PUB DATE 5 Dec 76
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at joint meeting of NACVE, SACVE, and the National Association of State Directors of Vocational Education (Houston, Texas, December 5, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Planning; Educational Needs; Educational Planning; *Educational Policy; Educational Responsibility; National Programs; *Policy Formation; Post Secondary Education; Secondary Education; Speeches; *Vocational Education; Work Attitudes

ABSTRACT

The importance of having a national policy for vocational education (called for by the National Advisory Council for Vocational Education) is the focus of this speech. After citing and discussing some baseline facts about vocational education's budget and enrollment figures, the author provides several reasons for having a national policy: (1) The scope of responsibility of the vocational education establishment has never been precisely defined, (2) Vocational education is uniquely vulnerable to attack from its critics because there is no carefully articulated policy against which its effectiveness can be measured, and (3) the need to strengthen the tradition of local control and adaptability with a clear and comprehensive policy which defines goals precisely so that individual institutions and subsystems can pursue them confidently and systematically. The author also discusses major points from the papers delivered at the vocational education Bicentennial Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, such as the work ethic, reshaping employers' approaches to the definition of work, harmonizing vocational educational policy with policy on other related areas, and the need for knowledge of the labor force. Concluding statements cover the author's ideas about the direction which a national policy should take. (HD)

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Marvin Feldman
Remarks
Joint meeting of NACVE, SACVE and the
National Association of State Directors
of Vocational Education

Regency Hyatt House
Houston, Texas

December 5, 1976 - 1:30 p.m.

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TOWARD A NATIONAL POLICY FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Last spring, NACVE issued a call for a national policy for vocational education. It was the starting gun of a continuing dialogue about the meaning and purpose of vocational education--a searching re-appraisal of where we are, where we have been, and where we should be going.

Tnis call has my full and enthusiastic support and I'm gratified to be able to discuss the proposal and its meaning with this most influential audience.

I hope I will find ways to convey to you fully the grave importance I attach to this proposal and to the process it has already catalyzed. This may be the most crucial year in the history of vocational education.

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I mean that literally. The process the Council has set in motion deserves your fullest attention, your understanding and most of all, your participation.

Let me quickly review with you the rationale behind the proposal and its timing.

First, let me remind you of some baseline facts which are familiar to everyone in this room, but which demand repetition.

. The nation's spending for vocational education is approaching $4 billion a year.

. For every dollar the federal government spends, states and localities spend more than six.

. Vocational enrollments exceed 13 1/2 million.

. Nearly half the nation's high school students and nearly a third of the community college students are enrolled in vocational programs.

. Vocational enrollments are increasing muchmore rapidly than so-called academic enrollments.

What do these figures mean? They mean that vocational education is becoming the dominant mode of education in America. They mean that vocational education--the field you and I represent--is becoming the nation's most basic industry.

This should be soul-satisfying for all of us. It is a tribute to the stubborn, sacrificial persistence of hundreds of anonymous advocates of work relevant education, and to the AVA itself. In a nation entranced by other more fashionable forms of education, vocational educators have insisted and re-insisted that the first step in human liberation must be liberation from a sense of uselessness--from dependency. And we have begun to prevail. Vocational education has achieved a new legitimacy, a new acceptance and a new maturity. I for one am fiercely proud to be associated with all of you.

But, at the same time, our growth has been growth largely without design--growth outside any framework of

policy. I know that kind of statement disturbs some of you. Yet, we have been guided by a very general—and very appropriate—imperative to provide more and more work-relevant education to more and more students.

Our strength has been in a sharp sense of direction. We have never had--and never needed--a detailed sense of destination other than merely a job entry head count.

As a result, while we have a growing number of programs in vocational education, we have no national policy for vocational education. There are indications everywhere that vocational education is outgrowing its original rationale and needs to rethink its mission.

Why do we need a national policy when we seem to have done so well without one? There are several reasons.

For one thing, partly because the scope of responsibility of the vocational education establishment has never been precisely defined, related manpower programs often don't

relate logically and comfortably to existing vocational programs. And even today, vocational education is too often placed along side of general education--not an integral part of it. Thus our search for policy will parallel that of a companion effort--the National Commission on Manpower Policy--which Bob Hall will discuss with you presently.

Equally important, vocational education is uniquely vulnerable to attack from its critics--not because it is ineffective, but because there is no carefully articulated policy against which its effectiveness can be measured, unless we intend to use the Manpower Policy as our Policy, and only that alone.

Last year, for example, when Grubb and Lazerson used the pages of the Harvard Educational Review to suggest that work-related education was illicit and ineffective, many vocational educators felt abused and defenseless. We weren't guilty, but many of us looked guilty because we seemed so

unsure of our innocence, when we were measured against what they perceived to be a national educational policy. Since we have one foot in industry and one in education, we need to be more certain how we bridge conflicting ideologies.

The incident made clear the lack of a solid sense of identity and purpose, the lack of a sure perception of our relationship to other necessary aspects of education, to the world of work itself, and to other related manpower programs and strategies.

It could be argued with some logic that vocational education should be removed from both education and labor for the benefit of all concerned, but I for one do not believe the future will allow more separatism. Our strength is our ability to save both missions better than they could do it alone.

Another special strength of vocational education has been its decentralization, a tradition of local control

and adaptability. We need to strengthen this tradition with a clear and comprehensive policy which defines goals precisely so individual institutions and sub-systems can pursue them confidently and systematically.

As things stand now, vocational education can mean one thing in one institution and something quite different in another. While this in itself is not necessarily bad, nonetheless, analysts and policymakers cannot perceive vocational education as anything more precise than an emphasis on teaching skills that can be sold. This in turn leads to tired arguments about social skills being more important than vocational skills and merely adds to the confusion about saleable skills.

As a result of all this, the National Council believes that vocational education is operating at less than full capacity. It is doing a good job with those it serves, but it could do better. And it is failing to serve other

millions it might serve. If we are to retain the public's uneasy confidence --at a time when skepticism about institutional effectiveness is ascendant--we must say clearly what we can be expected to do--and do it. Public attitudes are formed not so much by what we do, but by what we seem to fail to do.

Let me quote a paragraph or two from the National Council's call:

> "We need to know who is being reached through what programs and with what final effect. We need to know where we are succeeding and where we are failing. We need new measures of effectiveness.
>
> "We believe vocational education is already more certain of its methods than any other part of the educational establishment. But that is no longer enough.
>
> "We need to find out, without prejudice of

preconception, precisely what vocational education has done, what it is doing and what it could do."

Our Bicentennial Conference in Minneapolis in October was the first step. I think, when you examine the proceedings, you will agree with me that the Conference was a stunning success. Some of the nation's best minds were assembled to discuss these very questions. I found the sessions illuminating, inspiring and reassuring.

I couldn't begin to communicate the full flavor of those sessions to you in these few minutes, but let me give you a few random highlights. Economist Sar Levitan helped us get some facts straight. Many of us have been troubled by suggestions that the so-called work ethic is disappearing. Not so Sar Levitan tells us in his new book "Work is Here to Stay, Alas".

Reports of the death of the work ethic are, as Mark Twain would say, exaggerated. Labor force participation among the young is increasing. The contrary illusion was created because more young people are spending more time preparing for work.

Many of us worry about the pace of change. We have nightmares in which jobs appear and disappear before the ink dries on preparatory curricula--making planning impossible. Of course, job requirements are constantly changing, but Dr. Levitan reminded us of compensating continuities--secretarial skills are essentially unchanged since the invention of the typewriter, and truck driving since the Model T.

David Gottlieb in a sensible, optimistic paper pointed up the importance of re-shaping employers' approaches to the definition of work:

> "Advocates of career and vocational education should begin to devote much of their time to efforts directed at educating those who will be employing the future work force. It is not enough to assemble a profile as to what employers believe are the ideal characteristics and attitudes of those who they expect to employ. What is needed are programs which will help employers design the kinds of work settings and procedures which will take advantage of the skills, abilities and expectations of those who enter the labor force."

Henry David, in a paper full of wisdom and insight, emphasized the need for harmonizing vocational educational

policy with policy in other related areas:

> "Vocational education was once comprehensible as a dimension of educational policy. It no longer is that. . . . It does not stand apart from policies targeted at employment, [urban affairs] economic growth, human resource development, manpower development, manpower development and utilization, equality of opportunites, the reduction of poverty, and social welfare and income maintenance. . . As with other policy domains, that of vocational education will be compelled 'to become ever more attentive to issues of interdependence and reconciliation.' The explicit emphasis on the need for coordination between manpower and vocational education policies is only one manifestation of . . . 'a growing concern with . . . problems of policy harmonization.'"

Evron Kirkpatrick, in a predictably splendid essay, emphasized the need for knowledge:

> "We do know something about trends in the size of the labor force; about new entrants; and the like, but we know too little about how to absorb them or what the consequences will be of particular actions. Here we require a combination of economics, sociology, and political science, and none of these disciplines are very fully developed scientific enterprises . . . . There has been too little evaluation research that might provide scientific insights. We simply do not know very much."

Theodore Mitau wound up his thoughtful essay on post-secondary education with a ten point agenda, including these:

> "The learner must be the center of our post-secondary spectrum, not the institutions. There must be a common market of educational opportunities with easy

access, ready mobility and flexible programming so individuals can move through various institutional opportunities with the greatest likelihood of personal success and a minimum of 'bureaucratic obstruction.'"

and

"Let us ask of tomorrow's learner not so much where they learned what--which college or university--from whom they learned what--which professor in which course--but what they can do."

Willard Wirtz' eloquent paper cautioned against the tendency to think too narrowly--to extend our thinking to what he called"the broader uncertainties . . . about the place of people in the economy generally."

"This isn't," he said, "just a youth problem. There isn't much difference between the frustration

on the one hand of young people unable to find skilled jobs they are fully trained for, and, on the other, the feelings of futility that come to older men and women forced by compulsory retirement policies out of jobs they are fully qualified by competence and experience to continue to perform. We will have to face more squarely than we have in this country the harsh truth that even the present unsatisfactory employment levels are being maintained partly by postponing the time when young people enter the work force and by advancing the time older people leave it. The still broader truth is that we are using only part of the developed human resources and encountering increasing trouble as we enlarge that part of it we are developing."

I wish there were time for more. As I listened to the papers, I was struck by how little and how much the terms of discourse have changed in the last generation. Henry David recalled the agenda of the National Manpower Council twenty-five years ago:

1) how future workers can best be trained.

2) the goals and scope of vocational education.

3) the relationship of formal skill training to other forms of training.

4) the adequacy of federal policy and money.

5) the effectiveness of curricula and teaching.

6) the backward-looking orientation of much of vocational education.

7) the "class" character of vocational education.

8) the need for good counseling.

9) the tension between the goals of giving young people readily marketable skills and preparing them for a fuller life.

In other words, most of the questions we are asking today we were asking a quarter of a century ago.

But at the same time, I think certain essential concepts are winning a more prominent place in the dialog. Let me quickly enumerate what seem to me to be the most important of these.

I think we all have a new healthy sense of our limitations--that we invite public disillusion and disaffection if we advertise ambitions we cannot deliver. It is important to be ambitious, but we must avoid presenting education as a kind of miracle cure for whatever ails society. We must stop sounding like snake-oil salesmen.

There is a new acceptance of the idea of accountability--a new awareness that if we do not offer the public acceptable ways to measure the effectiveness of what we do, someone else will.

I think I see, between the lines, a new humility, a new awareness of the limitations of policy-making--a fuller sense that much of what happens to the people we serve is beyond the reasonable reach of public policy, and that the best policy in the world inevitably loses a lot in its translation into practice.

* * * *

I'm afraid I can't resist taking a minute or two to express some of my own hunches and prejudices about the direction our discussions should take.

In the first place, educational policy must fully acknowledge the massive changes in the human condition in the last couple of generations.

A century ago--and less--there were no vocational choices for the vast majority of American men and women.

Talk about the constructive use of leisure was, in the fullest sense of the word, academic. Most people didn't have any.

Comparatively few of our grandfathers lived through their 40's. (65 was selected as a retirement age when--and in part because--few people lived that long.)

Now vocational options have multiplied, most people spend less than a third of their time making a living and life expectancy has practically doubled. These things have never happened before for so many people. The implications for the educational establishment are far-reaching.

Secondly, I think we must free ourselves forever from the stubborn superstition that opportunities for constructive work are dwindling--and that the way to deal with the problem is to define more and more people out of the labor market. This idea is at least as old as the Luddites who sought to

destroy the machines that turned the wheels of the industrial revolution and thus multiplied work opportunities. Progress has come to suggest the need for increasing exclusion--with cruel consequences for the groups in society who find them hardest to bear--younger people older people, and members of minority groups. We cannot make sensible policy until we somehow bury the idea that we have exhausted our capacity for growth and are running out of work to do. We must fight hard against those who would dare advance the so called no-growth policy.

Third, I beleive the wave of the future has to be what we might call competence-based employment. The insistence of minorities and women that work be assigned on the basis of competence---rather than some prejudiced or sexist presumption--is revolutionizing the work place. Employers will, increasingly, be obliged to define jobs in terms of

results. Women are saying, "If I can get the same result, I deserve the same pay." Older people are saying "As long as I can get results, depriving me of work constitutes age discrimination." I believe that the only non-discriminatory way to employ and reward people is on the basis of competence--and that the logical extension of the spirit of civil rights legislation and the labor movement will be to make this approach to work definition universal.

This means, I think, that educators can move confidently in the direction of competency-based learning with a double benefit. We will reinforce and accelerate a wholesome trend in the world of work. We will find an increasing ease of articulation as the products of competency-based learning find competency-based employment.

Lastly, I believe part of any policy must involve the development of professionally acceptable performance measures. A distinctive feature of the social landscape

is a healthy, headlong diversification. We need a sharper consensus on our goals so we can diversify our approach to achieving them. We need a new pluralism in education so our educational response will be as diverse as the needs of our diversifying civilization.

What are the next steps? It seems to me there are two. NACVE with representatives from every one of the groups heretoday, should continue the development of a statement of policy, so that by late summer a draft may be circulated widely for comment. Once these comments are digested and incorporated, a final document should be presented to the President and to the Congress.

Secondly, the Education Amendments of 1974 authorize the President to call a White House Conference on Education next year. I believe we should take steps <u>now</u> to guarantee that the quest for a more realistic and comprehensive policy

be a major focus of that Conference. All of us in this room should exert whatever political pressure we could muster to be certain vocational education is on that Conference agenda.

Let me add a postscript on how you can participate in this process of policy development. I urge all of you to give the National Council or your own State Council the benefit of your thinking--your hopes and fears for the future. We'll give your communications careful and grateful consideration. We need your help.

Thank you for the privilege of speaking to you today, I am truly honored.